

## **National Association of Interpretation Focus Group Report**

On November 6, 2001 members of the Visitor Center Initiative Taskforce (VCI) held a focus group meeting with representatives from Corps lakes and visitor centers who attended the NAI National Conference in Des Moines, Iowa. A list of attendees is attached. VCI members involved were:

Nancy Rogers  
Greg Miller  
Debra Stokes  
Joe Bertolini

The focus group meeting was held in Pella, Iowa in conjunction with a tour of Lake Red Rock and Saylorville Lake, Corps projects located in the Rock Island District. 28 Corps employees participated in the focus group session. A list of participants, their project location and phone numbers is attached.

The group was broken into four sub-groups. Each sub-group was asked to respond to questions developed by the taskforce. Below are the categories and questions asked within each sub-group. The corresponding responses from each sub-group are in no particular order and only minor editing was done to add clarity to the group's response.

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### **Validate VCI Charter (Facilitator - Debra Stokes)**

1. What is the role of visitor centers in the Corps, the NRM program and at your project?
  - Inform the public and defend the Corps, even to the point of explaining our failures.
  - First stop for onsite visitors.
  - It becomes the dumping ground for everything (NRRS, walk-in reservations, etc.) at the project. Staff has to deal with things that have nothing to do with the visitor center.
  - A meeting place for committees from local surrounding area.
  
2. What can field projects expect to gain from the Visitor Center Initiative?
  - Stop the district/division from reprogramming monies earmarked for the visitor center and/or interpretation.
  - Raise the importance of visitor centers so line items get above the cutoff mark.
  - Regulation is too restrictive. This program requires budgetary equal footing. This needs to be considered a priority, not fluff.
  - Educate other Corps elements on why visitor centers are so important.
  - Ensure that the field offices understand how important partnering will be to the future of this program.

- Fix the cooperative association and cost sharing regulations so we do not have to go to Office of Counsel and fight the battle all over again.
- Explain how the national perspective should fit into the local visitor center.

3. Should all Corps visitor centers present the national Corps missions?

- Would like to see one small exhibit on the national perspective.
- Must be able to mold this exhibit into local exhibits (no “cow heads”).
- Educate the local staff to what the Corps does nationwide.
- Field personnel feel they must cover everything, including “the kitchen sink” in their exhibits. They do not feel they have permission to focus on the local mission(s).

4. How can the Corps story be presented in a passionate and appealing manner?

- Clothes, script, music, etc. cannot date this exhibit.
- We want high quality images.
- Would like this national perspective exhibit downloadable from the Internet.
- Tell what the Corps **does**, not what the Corps **is**.
- Provoke, relate, reveal!

5. Could a standardized national Corps missions exhibit be developed that could be integrated into existing visitor centers? If so, what type of media would be effective?

- The video needs to be exportable for many medias.
- Consider making this video available in varying lengths.
- Look at this exhibit as the Corps “commercial.”
- There is a need for a panel exhibit.
- Define the “Corps Story.” Is it our history, our current activities, our future or all the above?
- Would like to see the exhibit updated every 3 – 5 years.

**Visitor Center Regulations/Publications (Facilitator - Greg Miller)**

1. Are the objectives of the visitor center program as stated in the ER valid?

- The interpretive objectives should be revised. Objectives are usually measurable. Because evaluation may be difficult with existing resources, the focus group preferred the term “communication goals.” All visitor centers regardless of size should strive to accomplish the following goals:
  - Communicate the Corps missions from a national, regional, and project perspective.
  - Provide environmental education/interpretation relating to Corps missions.
  - Provide orientation to project recreational opportunities and safe use.

- Foster stewardship of public lands and waters.
- Interpret natural and cultural features and points of interest (this goal is customer driven, the other goals are agency driven).

2. Do the existing regulations and publications provide adequate policy guidance?

- There are inadequacies relating to visitor center classifications, process and common understanding of terminology.
- The regulation is particularly weak with regard to visitor centers that are partnership efforts. The current definition does not always accommodate the partner's interests.
- Visitor centers should be redefined for the next decade. The definition should be flexible, relevant and stress the importance of the program.
- The planning and evaluation process in the EP needs to be better defined including a definition of the terms to better reflect accepted industry terminology and procedures.
- The group recommends a definition section in the EP to promote common understanding of the visitor center program and its development. Terms defined might include:
  - Partnership
  - Visitor center
  - Interpretive sign
  - Exhibit
  - Display
  - Exhibit concept plan
  - Interpretive plan
  - Prospectus
  - Master plan
  - Cooperative associations
  - Theme
  - Kiosk

3. Should interpretive objectives for visitor centers be the same regardless of the size and type of center?

- The simple answer is yes. All visitor centers regardless of size should strive to meet the communication goals. The group consensus was that some visitor centers are resourced improperly because of the classifications that were given them and that classifications also influence the content they have. Not all centers will meet the objectives, however they should operate at a level that is commensurate with visitor need.

4. Should visitor center classifications be redefined? Are they needed at all?

- Yes. The regulation defines visitor centers in terms of content that should be communicated. Type A-national and regional, Type B, project level information, Type C, office that dispenses information. The focus group consensus was that all visitor centers, regardless of size, should have the same communication goals, including the

national and regional Corps missions. The ER/EP should define Corps operated visitor center as an interpretive facility that has the following features:

- Structure not necessarily limited to project lands
- Restrooms
- Publications are available
- Staff available to provide information (customer service for the Corps)
- Exhibits and displays (ranging from posters to dioramas, AV, etc.) are developed at a level commensurate with perceived need.

This definition would include most of the facilities currently defined as Type C Information Centers. So the term information center may not be needed. Other visitor contact points should be defined in the EP to show their relationship and connection with the visitor center (overlooks, gate houses, park ranger stations, kiosks). Are they needed at all? No!

5. Under what conditions and locations should the Corps' national and/or regional story be told?

- In all visitor centers.

6. Should districts be encouraged to build new visitor centers where none exist if resources can be found through partnerships and congressional funding?

- Yes. Current restrictions on building facilities seem to relate to CG funding and congressional authorization of the project rather than need. If visitor centers can be justified through the budget process and partnerships created to build facilities where they are needed, the regulation should not create additional hurdles.

7. How does the visitor center program relate to the overall interpretive program?

- The visitor center is one component. This relationship is defined in the overall interpretive plan.

8. What are the appropriate planning documents for visitor centers? (master plan, OMP, design memorandum, interpretive prospectus, objectives).

- Much confusion here. Need better definitions and step-by-step process.

### **Resourcing for Visitor Centers (Facilitator - Nancy Rogers)**

1. Should allocation of resources for visitor centers be based on visitation, size of the project, location or other criteria?

- Develop a formula that is specific to the market area of the visitor center. The boundary of that area should not go beyond where budget decisions are made, e.g.: division area vs. district. Take into account the following:
  - Age of visitor center
  - Visitation
  - Location
  - Condition
  - Outreach area
  - Population
  - Significance
  - Potential for positive PR
  
- It was thought that taking these elements into consideration would equalize the imbalance of some visitor centers that receive high profile visitation and programming but are not being adequately resourced.

2. Are visitor centers program adequately resourced (funding & staff)?

a. What are the barriers to funding the visitor center program and how should they be addressed?

Barriers

- Visitation
- Location
- Competing priorities and backlog maintenance
- Legal mandates take money away
  - Endangered Species
  - Cultural Resources
  - ADA
- The general attitudes toward visitor centers and interpretive programs in general (e.g., not important)
- Baseline budget is too low for project to operate. This creates a downward spiral of funding shortfalls.

Solutions

- All visitor centers should become an integral element in the Division Strategic Communications – Business Plan.
- Have a legal mandate to fund visitor centers.
- Network Congress
- Work with local constituency, stakeholders and volunteers.
- M.A.P. - Museum Assessment Program
- Cooperating associations
- Community development grants
- O&M funds

- NEETF grants
- Special congressional “adds”

b. Is visitor center staffing adequate? Why or why not? What needs to be done to change this?

Staffing is not adequate because:

- Staffing levels have decreased over time.
- Visitor centers are being operated by volunteers, students, other agencies.
- Low visibility of program among Natural Resources Management Program.
- Other park rangers do not want to work in the visitor center and/or do not know how. These duties are:
  - Not seen as “real work.”
  - Interpretive work is seen as having no value.
- Other increasing workload - interpretation just one of many duties
- Visitor center prospectus calls for unrealistic staffing levels
- Training issues
- High staff turnover
- Cost of living in area

Solutions

- More people, budget, training and volunteers.
- Budget needs to keep up with COLA’s and grade increases.
- Contracting in visitor center
- SCA volunteers
- Cooperating associations
- AmeriCorps
- AARP senior employment
- Joining with other federal, state, local agencies to staff visitor center.

c. Should contract staffing be used? Why or why not?

**Overwhelming negative response to contracting visitor centers**

- Agency ID gets lost with contractors wearing their own uniforms.
- Inadequate quality control of information being disseminated.
- Does not save money in the long run.
- Diminishes the importance of the Visitor Center Program- reflects poorly on the professionalism of park rangers.
- Lack of flexibility of what the employee can do; e.g., non-standard work.
- Contractors do minimal amount of technical work.
- Contracts with specifications that reflect all aspects of the job and oversight of interpretation quality are difficult to get through Contracting.
- Contract staffs need on-site supervision on a regular basis.

3. What innovative approaches can be used to resource visitor centers (partnerships, friends groups, cooperating associations, development of national lakes foundation, fee demonstration)?

- Cooperating associations
- Partnerships
- Friends groups
- Fee-for-profit groups, fee for school group use
- How will the National Lakes Program affect visitor centers?

4. Should fee demonstration be pursued?

- Overwhelming support of this idea! BUT only if it is used at visitor centers that can support charging fees (a local public that does not oppose). Monies generated should specifically go back to the visitor center, not just the project, and must not reduce the amount already budgeted.

### **Training and Field Support (Facilitator – Joe Bertolini)**

1. What kinds of training are needed for park managers and park rangers to support the Visitor Center Program?

- Volunteer recruitment and management
- ADA related issues – facility & display improvements and standards.
- ADA regulations & how they relate to visitor center operation.
- Basic orientation training for temporary staff (exportable, web based, etc.)
- Assist OMs, PMs, OP chiefs and higher in stressing the importance of visitor center in Corps mission.
- Train OMs, PMs, OP chiefs and higher about the importance of cooperating associations and their impact on visitor centers.
- Have an advanced level Interpretive Services course for visitor center staff.
- Provide grant writing and funding training.
- Revise, revisit or rescind policy on the number of Corps employees allowed to attend workshops/trainings/conferences. This is a huge impediment to the exchange of information, knowledge and networking.
- Develop training on how to do effective Internet site searches.
- Include professional level visitor center managers in the professional development committee flow chart and training standards.
- Train employees on how to identify and encourage local advocates, e.g., congressional and other levels of support.

2. How can the NRM Gateway be used to support the visitor center program?

- Develop a list of Corps visitor center contacts from across the nation and post. Keep it up to date and add links to e-mail and visitor center Internet pages.

- Develop a message board (list server?) for visitor center issues where questions and answers can be posted.
  - Keep an archive of previously asked questions (FAQ?).
  - Post success stories and pictures of good ideas.
  - Highlight new regulations or changes to regs.
  - Link to HQ publications page. Add or improve the search engine.
  - Provide a subscription option for folks to get messages about changes to the page.
  - Keep in mind everyone does not have DSL or high speed connections. (Keep it simple, frames vs. text versions).
3. Does the Corps need in-house consultants to assist visitor center and exhibit development?
- NO!
  - Would prefer an optional center of expertise, maybe something like the NPS Harpers Ferry program.
  - Staff wants greater local input from the ground up on the design, layout, location, flow, etc. of facilities. Staff wants to be involved, not just told by engineers what they will get.
4. What other support would you like to see?
- Visitor centers should be more important to the agency than OMBIL, NRRS, FEMS/MAXIMO, etc. Give this use the same level of support and funding!
  - Make “marketing the Corps” a good thing. ADVERTISE!
  - Include advertising, marketing, public relations responsibilities in MOU’s (Bass Pro, NWTF, DU, BSA, NRC, etc.)
  - Implement these suggestions. Do not let the VCI become a dead end.
  - The Corps needs to be willing to support NAI and NRPA with financial contributions. If we can support the National Water Safety Congress why not other professional organizations?
  - Be sure to get public involvement in visitor center development.
  - Why has RAMP failed?
  - Do away with PAO and let Natural Resources handle the Corps public relations.



## Attendance List

Name	Location	Phone #
Douglas R. Bailey	Cochiti Lake	(505) 465-0307
Laura Bainbridge	Lake Red Rock	(641) 828-7522
Donald Bardole	Upper Miss River Project	(309) 796-5338
Patrick Berry	Bonneville L&D	(541) 374-8820
Joe Bertolini*	Caesar Creek Lake	(513) 897-1050
Heather Burke	Dworshak Dam	(208) 476-1279
Sue Clevinstine	Rock Island District	(309) 794-5839
Leane Cruitt	St. Louis District	(217) 774-3313
Pam Doty	Lake Shelbyville	(217) 774-3951
Robert W. Esperson	Mississippi Headwaters	(218) 829-3334
Kevin Ewbank	Illinois Waterway Visitor Center	(815) 667-4054
Dee Flower	Seattle District	(208) 437-7224
Rachel Garren	St. Louis District	(314) 331-8624
Mary Ann Heitmeyer	Mark Twain Lake	(573) 735-4097
Leon Hodges	Upper Miss River Project	(309) 794-4527
Thom Holden	Lake Superior Maritime Visitor Center	(218) 720-5271
Corrine Hudapp	Blackhawk Park	(608) 648-3314
Susan Kline	Pittsburgh District	(412) 395-7179
Sue Layden	Lake Sonoma	(707) 433-9483, x 27
Charolotte Lister	Lookout Point Dam	(541) 937-2131, x 142
Greg Miller*	Kansas City District	(816) 983-3644
Robin C. Norris	Bonneville L&D	(541) 374-8820
Nancy Rogers*	Bay Model Visitor Center	(415) 332-3871
Carol Ryan	Gavins Point	(402) 667-7873
Danny Sandersfeld	Kansas City District	(660) 438-7317, x 1218
Maria Shafer	Lake Shelbyville	(217) 774-3313
Vicky Silcox	Fort Peck Lake	(406) 526-3411
Tracy Spry	Lake Red Rock	(641) 828-7522
Debra Stokes*	New Orleans District	(504) 862-1344
Kelly Ulrick	Saylorville Lake	(515) 276-4656
Don Wadleigh	Chicago District	(312) 353-6400, x 4015
Toni Westland	Lake Okeechobee	(863) 983-8101, x 245

\* VCI committee member & workshop facilitator.